

48th annual Hash Bash celebrates victory of legalization in Ann Arbor

clickondetroit.com

April 6, 2019

By Meredith Bruckner



Crowds fill the University of Michigan's Diag during Hash Bash on April 6, 2019 (Photo: Meredith Bruckner)

ANN ARBOR – This year's Hash Bash had many firsts.

It was the first Hash Bash to take place during a time when adult recreational cannabis use is legal in Michigan, Debbie Dingell became the first U.S. representative to speak at the event and, from the looks of the crowd, it may have been the biggest Hash Bash in history.

As thousands packed The Diag to hear Ann Arbor native Laith Al-Saadi kick off the event at high noon with his signature performance of the national anthem on electric guitar, the rally quickly turned into a celebration of the strides Michigan made this year to legalize the drug that is federally categorized as a Schedule I substance.



Laith Al-Saadi performs the national anthem at Hash Bash on April 6, 2019 (Photo Meredith Bruckner)

Poet and activist John Sinclair performed alongside Al-Saadi and said as he took the stage: "Welcome to legalization in the state of Michigan. You haven't been here before unless you were here in 1972 when we started it. We went three weeks without any marijuana law and, believe me, we took total advantage of every minute. That's how it started and I'm proud to see that it's continuing in full force."

Sinclair was the inspiration for the very first Hash Bash in 1972. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison for selling an undercover officer two joints. After serving nearly two years, celebrity activists like John Lennon and Stevie Wonder descended upon Ann Arbor to hold the John Sinclair Freedom Rally, and soon after, Sinclair was released from prison, the Michigan Supreme Court having declared the marijuana law that put him there unconstitutional.

The move left the state's marijuana statutes in limbo, and Hash Bash was born.



U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell addresses the crowd at Hash Bash on April 6, 2019 (Photo: Meredith Bruckner)

Dingell took the stage next. "I am your least likely speaker at Hash Bash," she said to the crowd. "I've never smoked marijuana, but I don't drink, either. My father was a drug addict, and my sister died of a drug overdose. So I've got some experience that makes me nervous. But I also know that people across America are speaking, the states are the laboratories of the laws and we have got to change the laws to go with what is happening across America.

"We've got to decriminalize marijuana and get people out of jail that are in jail. Law enforcement has told me for years that they can't do their jobs because they've been focusing on something that accomplishes nothing. And let's be honest. I'm looking at this crowd, I don't care what race, what color, what gender, whatever you are, you're all smoking marijuana. But if your color happens to be black, you've got a four more times likelihood of having been put in jail, had an unfair jail sentence and for too long."



U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell speaks with state representatives Jeff Irwin and Yousef Rabhi during Hash Bash on April 6, 2019 (Photo: Meredith Bruckner)

Dingell also focused on the issue of banking. Marijuana dispensaries are prohibited from banking like traditional businesses.

"We need the safe bank law. We've got to set up the regulatory framework, because people, you can't go around with duffel bags of cash. You shouldn't pay your employees in cash. And if you're trying to start a business, then you need to be able to go to the bank and be treated like any other business."

She mentioned that her husband, the late John Dingell, was in a lot of pain toward the end of his life. She had urged him to try medical marijuana, but he was afraid of it.

"He's up there," she said, pointing to the sky, "and he probably cannot believe that I'm here."

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, while not there in person, sent an audio message:

"I was there last year when we were still trying to get recreational marijuana on the ballot. And you know what? We worked hard, and we got it done. We made recreational marijuana legal in the state of Michigan. Last month, I established the Marijuana Regulatory Agency to make sure we can efficiently regulate medical and recreational marijuana. I am proud of the work we did to pass Prop 1."

Michigan state Sen. Jeff Irwin shed light on the local cannabis activists who have been working on the issue for decades.

"I really want to thank some of the activists that have been at this for so long," he said. "We heard from John Sinclair, we just heard from Chuck Ream, we've heard from Adam Brook: the people who have been keeping this issue going for the last 40 years while residents have been harassed, they've had their houses raided, they've been thrown in jail, they've lost their jobs, they've lost their families."

"Through all of that pain and suffering and stigma, those activists have been here on The Diag every year, calling for change, calling for reform, calling for freedom. And last November, we all did that together."



A man holds up a flag at Hash Bash on April 6, 2019 (Photo: Meredith Bruckner)

Irwin also focused on the issue of expungement and urged the crowd to call their lawmakers to demand the release of those serving marijuana-related convictions and that they have their records cleared.

"The fight continues in Lansing. We have tens of thousands of our fellow citizens who have trouble getting jobs, who have trouble getting loans for school, and we need to erase their records (and) set aside those convictions."

Numerous activists spoke at the event, including Ream, who was an attendee at the very first Hash Bash. "It's a great time to be high in Ann Arbor, Michigan," he said to a roaring crowd.



Activist Chuck Ream addresses the crowd at Hash Bash on April 6, 2019 (Photo: Meredith Bruckner)



Photo: Meredith Bruckner

Al-Saadi also got a loud reaction when he revealed his first time trying marijuana was before Hash Bash years ago.

"You know, I don't know whether I should be saying this, but the first time that I ever smoked weed was before coming down here when I was 13 years old for the Hash Bash," he said. "Growing up in Ann Arbor, I've always been able to enjoy the more tolerant marijuana policy in the Midwest and the really awesome community here."

Although it was a celebratory atmosphere, activists say there is still work to be done on the federal level to legalize recreational use of marijuana and have its Schedule I classification removed.